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ABSTRACT

The New Jersey department of education has implemented a minimum standards program to assure that all students have the individual opportunities they require for mastering the basic skills. The 1976-77 program is transitional and is used to build toward full implementation in the 1977-78 school year. In full operation, the state tests will be administered in May of each year in grades 3, 6, 9, and 11. Students who are below mastery will be provided individualized remedial or supplemental instruction. Study efforts in graduation requirements, communication and life skills, and anchoring procedures have also been initiated. The program also will implement program guidelines in order to assist local districts in providing the highest quality of basic skills programs. (Author)

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NEW JERSEY MINIMUM BASIC SKILLS PROGRAM

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NEW JERSEY MINIMUM BASIC SKILLS PROGRAM

I. INTRODUCTION

The nationwide concerns with the decrease in cognitive achievement scores as well as the evidence of incomplete mastery of basic skills indicated by New Jersey's Statewide Educational Assessment Program prompted the State Board and Commissioner to appoint a Task Force on Competency Indicators and Standards on November 20, 1975.

This task force was charged with:

A. Surveying all available research materials on the establishment of competency indicators and standards.

B. Recommending policies on local and state competency indicators.

C. Recommending a process by which all interested parties might participate in establishing appropriate competency indicators and standards.

D. Recommending methods for identifying student competencies.

E. Recommending methods for maximizing attainment of each student's achievement.

During the deliberations of the Task Force, a bill was introduced in the state legislature requiring minimum standards of student proficiency. This bill was passed by both houses and signed into law by the Governor. This law stated:

A. That "uniform statewide standards of pupil proficiency in basic communications and computational skills" be established.

B. That these standards be established "at appropriate points in the educational careers of the pupils."

C. That these standards be "reasonably related to those levels of proficiency ultimately necessary as part of the preparation of individuals to function politically, economically, and socially in a democratic society."

D. That in each district where proficiency is below state standard, the local board will establish "an interim goal designed to assure reasonable progress toward the goal . . . by each such pupil . . . . Each such district, as part of its annual educational plan, shall develop a basic skills improvement plan for progress toward such interim goal."

E. That the district annual report shall include evaluation of pupil proficiency in basic skills and of the effectiveness of any basic skills improvement plan.

F. That the law shall take effect immediately.

This law naturally changed the focus of the task force. The new emphasis resulted in a concentration on how the law would be most wisely implemented. The recommendations of the task force were presented in two sets; (1) for the current school year, and (2) for next school year.

A. For The Current School Year

1. That a committee assist in selecting minimum basic skills items from the existing statewide tests which can be used for developing minimum standards scores for this year.

2. That students who do not achieve a 65 percent mastery level on these items be evaluated, given appropriate instruction, and that communication be established with the student's parents.

3. That districts where one-third or more of the students are below the 65 percent mastery level develop an improvement plan for the basic skills.

4. That special provisions be made for classified and non-English dominant students.

B. For The 1977 School Year and Beyond

1. That current state test content be reviewed in light of minimum basic skills requirements.

2. That testing be done in grades 3, 6, 9, and 12.

3. That the tests concentrate on reading and mathematics.

4. That the tests be criterion-referenced and a single composite score be generated. Mastery level is to be set for each test and grade level.

5. That if a student does not achieve the minimum at the grade level, the student will receive remedial instruction and be administered the test annually until the student attains or surpasses the minimum level.

6. That parental involvement be required.

7. That provisions be made for the exemption of classified students.

8. That special provisions be made for non-English dominant students.

9. That the highest priority for technical assistance shall be directed at basic skills deficiencies.

10. That a study of other communication skills begin.

11. That no change in state aid or financial incentives be recommended at this time.

The task force recommendations and the legal requirements were closely studied by all senior staff within the Department. Particularly close analyses were conducted within the Divisions of Research, Planning, and Evaluation; and School Programs. County Superintendents and regional staffs also reviewed these materials.

In order to receive unbiased reviews, an independent group of nationally recognized specialists in tests and measurements was also engaged to review the recommendations.

Virtually all of the recommendations of the task force were accepted. Some modifications were required in order to comply with the specific requirements of the law and to ensure validity and reliability of the tests.

Specifically, the total test was used rather than a sub-set of the tests. This was necessary to protect the established reliability and validity of the instruments. In addition, the law required an improvement plan for all students below mastery rather than the task force recommendation of a required plan only for those schools where one-third or more of the students were below standard. The program presented to the State Board by the Department also went further than the legal requirements in that it emphasized basic skills programs as well as test scores. The twelfth grade test recommendation was also changed to an eleventh grade test in order to allow time for remediation in the senior year.

II. MINIMUM STANDARDS PROGRAM

The key elements of the plan adopted by the State Board included:

A. Activities and Plans For The 1976 School Year

1. Test Administration - The Statewide Educational Assessment Tests were administered in October, 1976. Special analyses for minimum standards purposes were developed.

2. Basic Skills Management Plans - (due December 1, 1976) Basic Skills Improvement Plans were required for each school and district. These plans provided a process plan for improving basic skills based on identified needs.

3. Statewide Testing Results - (returned December/January) These results provided product data on individual students, classrooms, schools and districts.

4. Minimum Standards Reports - Schools and Districts - (February, 1977) Each school and district received a roster of students above and below the 65 percent mastery level. These rosters contained cluster scores to assist the schools and districts in program diagnostics. Students with scores below standard were grouped into priority categories on the basis of need.

5. Minimum Standards Reports - Technical Assistance - (February, 1977) Each Educational Improvement regional Center and County Office were provided with need requirements for the schools and districts within their geographic areas. These reports identified the schools and districts with the highest needs for technical assistance. These rosters also presented the particular test areas which presented the greatest difficulty. The regional units were required to provided assistance to the schools and districts with the greatest needs.

6. Program Guidelines - Guidelines for basic skills programs were developed and review drafts are in circulation. Input on these guidelines are being solicited this Spring for finalization in the Summer (see section B1 below).

7. Basic Skills Workshops -(April-May, 1977) By this point in time, all districts will have a management plan for the improvement process, product results in the form of state test results, minimum standards data and requirements, a technical assistance mechanism for schools and districts with basic skills need, and a framework for improving and building their basic skills program in the form of the draft guidelines.

These elements taken together provide the comprehensive information needed for basic skills program improvements. Workshops will be conducted throughout the state to assist schools and districts in integrating this data into their basic skills improvement plans as required by law.

8. Annual Plan - July 1, 1977 - The previously provided information and workshops will be directed toward assisting districts in meeting all requirements of the Minimum Standards Law. The annual report forms will be completed in early 1977 and be available to schools and districts prior to the workshops. Thus, all available assistance will be centered on meeting the annual reporting requirements.

B. Activities and Timelines For 1977 and Beyond

The 1976-77 activities are interim and transitional in nature. Further refinements are required for full program implementation. Specifically, the program guidelines will require implementation, the tests will have to be redeveloped, program articulation must be further developed, and technical assistance capabilities improved.

1. Program Guidelines - The major elements of the guidelines would be implemented in time for the 1978 annual Basic Skills Improvement Plan and would require that programs:

a. Meet minimum program standards necessary for providing satisfactory instruction.

b. Reflect local, student, and community needs.

c. Provide for coordination with existing programs that relate to basic skills.

d. Allow for state monitoring of local implementation of the program elements outlined in these guidelines.

e. Allow for state monitoring of minimum standards.

These guidelines would be built upon a number of specified elements within which local districts would have flexibility to ensure the meeting of individual needs. In effect, the guidelines would require the process components of basic skills instruction and allow districts the flexibility of determining instructional techniques, materials, and procedures.

Common elements would include:

a. Clustering of grades into levels for determining skill needs and instructional sequences. These clusters would correspond to the minimum standards test and current instructional sequences in reading and mathematics.

b. The identification of exit skills for each of the clusters. These would be used as the basis of the minimum proficiency levels for each cluster (grades 1-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10-12).

c. The designation by each district of those sub-skills which relate to the exit skills identified for each cluster.

d. The establishment of a common framework for student screening and evaluation to determine student needs and programs in the basic skill areas.

e. The offering of instructional program strands in basic skills to meet student needs. As a minimum, this would include developmental and remedial/ supplemental instruction to meet all identified needs. It would also include enrichment strands for the gifted students.

f. A defining of what components should exist in each instructional strand to ensure the providing of adequate services for all students in basic skills.

g. Established criteria for entering and exiting any program strand including all federal, state, and local programs related to basic skills.

h. A plan to integrate the different strands and funded programs in the school system.

i. The establishment of a record system to chart student progress.

Local districts would determine all operational and implementation procedures within these guidelines.

2. Test Redevelopment - The current content of our statewide tests will require a systematic review. This review requires input from all sectors of the educational community as

well as public involvement. This input is solicited through a broad committee framework:

a. Advisory Committee - A committee was appointed by the Commissioner and State Board to oversee the redevelopment and redefinition efforts. Members of this committee will sit with each of the various specialist committees as explained below. This committee meets at the discretion of the chairman. All materials and support necessary for their reporting responsibilities to the Commissioner and the State Board are provided by the Department and the various working committees.

b. Working Committees - In defining subject matter and constructing tests, the working groups must be composed of persons who have indepth knowledge of the technical requirements. At the same time, public interests must be protected by this overview committee. Working committees are required in the following areas:

- Elementary Reading
- Elementary Mathematics
- Secondary Reading
- Secondary Mathematics
- Communications and Life Skills
- Technical Advisory Council
- Minority Groups Advisory Council

The four subject matter committees are used to define the minimum basic skills in the areas of their purview.

These committees will survey all elements of the educational community in defining the minimum basic skills. The Communications and Life Skills group is charged with soliciting broad input in the definition of communications and life skills appropriate for our responsibilities under the Law. The Technical Advisory Council is composed of tests and measurements specialists from throughout the nation who are responsible for reviewing all testing instruments. The Minority Groups Advisory Council reviews the tests for overt or covert bias. Members of these councils also sit on the Subject Matter Committees and the Communications and Life Skills Committees.

c. Activities and Timelines

November, 1976 - Commissioner and State Board appoint committees.

November-December - Subject matter committees define universe of basic skills items.

November - Communications and Life Skills Committee begins work.

January-March - Systematic survey of all components of the educational community using the universe list.

March-May - Transformation of subject matter surveys into test objectives.

June-July - Test Constructon

July - Review of tests by Subject Matter Committees

July - Review of tests by Minority Groups Advisory Council

August - Test Modifications

September-October - Field test of instruments

October-November - Review of field test results by Technical Advisory Council. Recommendations on test improvements and reporting formats.

December-March - Printing, distribution, development of scoring routines, etc.

January, 1978 - Report of communications and Life Skills Committee to Commissioner and State Board.

May, 1978 - Administer tests (note: Spring testing will be implemented on a two-year trial basis.

III. SUPPORT EFFORTS AND ACTIVITIES

The preceding steps and procedures are the most obvious and immediate activities. However, it is necessary to develop and plan improved and continuing procedures for the 1977-78 school year and beyond. The critical elements which were initiated include the following:

A. Program Articulation - At this point in time, local schools and districts may have basic skills programs under Title I, State Compensatory Education, Bilingual Education, Right-To-Read, Educational Assessment Program, locally sponsored remedial programs, regular instructional programs, and perhaps a Title IV-C grant. All of these diverse elements must be articulated within the basic skills program guidelines. The target date for the consolidation and integration of these programs is July, 1978.

B. Test Anchoring - Local schools and districts have testing programs for their own purposes as well as for the requirements of special programs. We have initiated collection of data on these instruments through the annual reports in order to assess progress at interim grade levels not assessed by the state testing program.

C. Test Based Funding - A review of the literature advises us not to tie compensatory education monies to minimum standards scores. There is a logical linkage but one that is extremely difficult to effectively administer. Nevertheless, an extensive study of this area is required as remedial and supplemental programs are required under the minimum standards law.

D. Articulation with Higher Education Programs - At the same time that the Department is implementing minimum standards, the Department of Higher Education is beginning work in their basic skills screening efforts. Our staff is working with theirs in this undertaking. At the same time, the Department has invited Higher Education representatives to work with us in developing our programs. This mutual procedure is designed to assure compatability between our programs.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The New Jersey Department of Education has implemented a minimum standards program to assure that all students have the individual opportunities they require for mastering the basic skills. The 1976-77 program is transitional and is used to build toward full implementation in the 1977-78 school year.

In full operation, the state tests will be administered in May of each year in grades 3, 6, 9, and 11. Students who are below mastery will be provided individualized remedial or supplemental instruction.

Study efforts in graduation requirements, communication and life skills, and anchoring procedures have also been initiated. The program also will implement program guidelines in order to assist local districts in providing the highest quality of basic skills programs.